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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000929

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/24/2016
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [KISL](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01--AOUN READY TO COOPERATE WITH EVERYONE WHO
SUPPORTS HIM

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Classified By: JEFFREY FELTMAN, AMBASSADOR. REASON SECTION 1.4 (B)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a March 23 meeting with the Ambassador, Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), expressed unquestioning conviction of the correctness of his positions. In Aoun's world, his agreement with Hizballah is flawless, his attack on the parliamentary majority is righteous, all those who disagree have nefarious hidden agendas, and the key to political stability is an Aoun presidency. Addressing the stalled dialogue, Aoun admitted to a Wednesday, March 22 altercation with Hariri, who he described as inexperienced (at the end of which Aoun apologized to Hariri for any personal offense). He added that Hariri's media outlets had frequently hurt Aoun's feelings by labeling him pro-Syrian. However, speaking with the Ambassador, Aoun did not hesitate to defend the pro-Syrian forces now speaking out in support of his candidacy. Aoun rejected out of hand the thought that these Syrian agents might be praising Aoun in order to stain him with Syrian collaboration. "Some people are calling him the Christian Jumblatt," his aide bragged, "because he can move the Christians any way he likes." Aoun showed no sign of compromise, conciliation or a desire to reach out to other factions: it is up to them to be flexible. Aoun did say that he believed that the present Lebanese leadership could, if asked, come up with a new compromise cabinet -- including Aoun's bloc inside -- that President Lahoud would accept.

HIZBALLAH THINKS I AM GREAT, AND I AGREE

¶2. (C) Accompanied by PolChief, the Ambassador met with Michel Aoun and aide/son-in-law Gebran Bassil at Aoun's home in suburban Beirut. The Ambassador expressed USG concerns that, in the national dialogue, Hizballah and Amal were outwardly cooperative, while using delaying tactics to stall the national dialogue. In response Aoun launched into an exposition of how he had singlehandedly, through his agreement with Hizballah, averted a Sunni-Shia civil war in Lebanon by returning an equilibrium to the political scene. Hizballah, Aoun said, was becoming more Lebanese. It was Aoun's victory that Hizballah agreed not to use their arms in defense of Iran, or to liberate Israel. Aoun was convinced that once "Hizballah's prisoners" in Israel are freed and Shebaa farms is liberated, the GOL will be able to integrate

Hizballah into the national defense structure. The GOL, under General Aoun's leadership, will then control the south. Aoun did not directly respond when the Ambassador asked if Hizballah's arms were really an effective means to achieve their goals of defending Lebanon. He admitted that most of Hizballah's arms were ballistic rockets suited only for use as area weapons. But Aoun said that once Hizballah is satisfied that the south is liberated and prisoners return from Israel, they will submit to the authority of Lebanese Army.

13. (C) Aoun said he had never discussed support for is presidential bid with Hassan Nasrallah. However, he assumed that Nasrallah's comment that Aoun was "a serious candidate," was endorsement from Hizballah. Responding to the Ambassador's comments about rumors of others backed by Syria and Hizballah, Aoun did not address the idea that Hizballah was lining up back-up candidates among the Maronite political elite. The Ambassador suggested that faced with the present impasse, the only way forward was for compromise between the parties. Aoun agreed but went on to say that some of the March 14 members should come over to him. They need to be flexible. "Maybe Walid Jumblatt would come over," Aoun joked. Aoun said the he knew Jumblatt and others were against him from the start "although I suffered abroad." Before his return to Lebanon, figures close to March 14 interceded with the French government to delay his return home, Aoun claimed. On his return, no came to call on him except those who were close to Syria.

IF THEY GIVE, I WILL TAKE

14. (C) "Hariri must be more flexible," Aoun said. He believes Hariri must accept that Aoun is not threatening the March 14 interests. If they do that, and accept Aoun's guidance on the presidency, then things can move forward. At one point, Aoun leaned forward, pointed to his chest and said

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"No one has ever gotten 70 percent of the Christians before. It is historic." Bassil added happily that an influential observer had called the General "A dangerous man," because, like Jumblatt, Aoun enjoyed complete support among his constituency. When the Ambassador asked if Aoun was willing to be more flexible in order to appeal to the March 14 forces, the former general shrugged and said "we have nothing left to give." He said that his faction serves as a needed counter-balance to Hariri and March 14. Aoun claimed that the present majority in parliament does not reflect the true political will of Lebanon. He and his party have appealed to the constitutional court to contest ten seats lost to them in the 2005 parliamentary elections. If these challenges are decided in their favor, Aoun's FPM could challenge the majority in parliament and rectify what Aoun sees as an improper political balance.

15. (C) Once Aoun is president, he foresees no problems cooperating with Hariri as Prime Minister. "As long as they obey the law and follow the constitution." But Aoun had a warning for March 14 as well. He accused members of March 14 of the habit of abusing power. The members of the group were involved in business scandals in the telecommunications, construction and contracting sectors, Aoun claimed. When the Ambassador pointed out that Hizballah runs illegal telecom and internet service and receives covert funds from a foreign government, Aoun acknowledged that "Berri, Jumblatt, and everyone except General Aoun" was involved in such activities and they would have to "stop it," to make way for a new era in public policy when Aoun is in charge. Aoun is still unimpressed with Saad Hariri as a political leader, "He acts like a Saudi prince." Aoun went on to label Hariri inexperienced, and unwilling to share power. He doesn't even share power within March 14. They are very obedient to Hariri," Aoun claimed.

¶6. (C) Aoun confirmed rumors that he and Hariri had exchanged angry words at the March 22 dialogue session, and gave details. When he came into the meeting, Saad said to Aoun "Rustom Ghazali (former Syrian viceroy and intelligence chief in Lebanon)," referring to a newspaper report in which Aoun reportedly described Hariri as the economic Rustom Ghazali of Lebanon. Aoun recognized the reference and blamed journalists for inaccurately reporting Aoun's remarks. He answered Hariri saying that he never intended to label him in that way. Injured, Hariri retorted that Ghazali killed his father Rafiq. Aoun claims at that point he apologized, explaining that he never intended to deliver a personal insult, just political rhetoric. The matter was then closed as far as Aoun was concerned. (Note: Evidently Hariri did not agree, because Aoun displayed copies of editorials from a Hariri paper naming Aoun as the real new Rustom Ghazali. End note.) Aoun said that he raised the issue of March 14 name calling with Hariri in the dialogue, pointing out that the persistent attacks on Aoun from the Hariri-owned press were personally hurtful to him.

¶7. (C) Despite the trouble with Hariri, Aoun said the atmosphere in the dialogue was positive. He added that he found Walid Jumblatt an interesting man with a good sense of humor. The two men spent some time together during a break and Aoun described the exchange as "humorous." The Ambassador told Aoun that he USG was concerned that Hizballah and Amal were being cooperative in the sessions, but were using delaying tactics to prevent progress in the dialogue. He warned Aoun that there was concern on the street that his allies were using Aoun to take the country in a bad direction. Aoun rejected this and restated the importance of his alliance with Hizballah.

THE SYRIANS DON'T REALLY LIKE ME

¶8. (C) Aoun denied that pro-Syrian elements were resurfacing during the dialogue to offer him support. "They are just trouble makers who have always been there with no support." He repeated his refrain that they, "were free to say what they wished." Even Emile Lahoud's recent comments naming the former general as a suitable successor, and the "We are from the same school," comment Lahoud made seemed not to concern Aoun. "I didn't answer him. I did not want to enter into a polemical debate with him," Aoun said. He refused to contemplate the Ambassador's suggestion that

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Lahoud could use him to stay in office. He insisted that it was mistakes made by the opposition that might keep Lahoud in office, not Aoun's protection of Lahoud. Aoun said that if the March 14 group listens to popular appeals for Lahoud's departure, they must also listen to popular appeals naming Lahoud's successor. Aoun said that if the majority backs him, Lahoud would leave.

¶9. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun to consider his allies: Hizballah, Emile Lahoud, and a variety of pro-Syrian politicians like Wi'am Wihab, Talal Arslan, Suleiman Franjeh, and Omar Karami. How, the Ambassador said, is the United States supposed to interpret these alliances, when the international community wants to see a strong, independent and democratic Lebanon? Aoun pled helplessness, asking the Ambassador how he might distance himself from Lahoud. "I don't see him." Aoun said the President has asked him for an appointment several times. However, Aoun always refuses on the grounds that the time is not right. Aoun claimed to have met Lahoud only once since his return to Lebanon as part of the delegation to discuss the government formation in 2005.

¶10. (C) The FPM leader refused to entertain the idea that his less reputable supporters were trying to damage him through

public support. He claimed that pro-Syrians came to his side on his return to Lebanon, when he was snubbed by the leaders of March 14. But he knew the pro-Syrians were coming to him for tactical reasons. "Syria does not want me to become president," Aoun affirmed. He said that Syria knows that an Aoun presidency would mean a sovereign Lebanon working as an equal partner with Syria. For good relations with Syria, Lebanon needed a new government.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador raised the recent objection to early parliamentary elections raised by the Maronite Patriarch, Cardinal Sfeir. The USG was also concerned that the necessary preparations for early elections, and the drafting of a new election law would only serve to delay progress on the political front in Lebanon. Aoun said he knew that the GOL chartered electoral commission was working on a suitable election law proposal. Aoun understood that only Beirut and northern Lebanon still presented problems in the redrawing of electoral districts. In response to a question from the Ambassador, Aoun said, in the short term, there needed to be a new cabinet, in which his bloc would play its proper role. Aoun said that he believed that he and the assembled political leaders could come assemble a new government that President Lahoud would accept.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) True to form, Aoun demonstrated no flexibility in his position on the presidency or cooperation with March 14. He cannot conceive of Hizballah and the agents of Syria duping him into serving their interests. His claim to be able to move the Christians as he likes seems overstated. But his conviction seems to be sincere. Aoun is not prepared to consider any other candidate for the presidency. Within March 14, Aoun is regarded as a difficult, even stupid megalomaniac. The chances for real cooperation between the two groups is at best slim. Soon after our arrival at Aoun's home, he told the Ambassador that dissident Christian politicians from the Liberal party of Dory Chamoun had just left him. They had come to speak out against Dory Chamoun and to express support for Aoun -- another example, in the General's view, as to why he, and he alone, should serve as Lebanon's next president.

FELTMAN